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Cushman Farm

Latha Swamy
City of New Haven Food System
Policy Division

STAFF

Chelsea Gazillo
Working Lands Alliance Director
cgazillo@farmland.org

Robin Kerber
New England Policy Associate
rkerber@farmland.org

Working Lands Alliance Policy Statement Appropriations Committee *Conditional Support for H.B. 6659* Public Hearing February 27, 2023

Dear Co-Chairs Senator Osten and Representative Walker, Vice Chairs Senator Hartley, Representative Exum, and Representative Paris, Ranking Members Senator Berthel and Representative Nuccio, and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee,

Working Lands Alliance appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony *with conditional support* for H.B. 6659 - An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium ending June 30, 2025, and making appropriations therefor.

My name is Robin Kerber, and I am American Farmland Trust's New England Policy Associate. In Connecticut, I am also the Policy Associate for the Working Lands Alliance – a project of American Farmland Trust. WLA is a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving the state's farmland. WLA includes farmers and such organizations as CT Farmland Trust, CT Farmer Alliance, City of New Haven Food Policy Division, CT Land Conservation Council, and the CT Farm Bureau Association, among many others. As an Alliance, we care deeply about saving the state's working farmland and ensuring a healthy agricultural sector and prosperous future for Connecticut's farmers.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony concerning the proposed budget for fiscal years 2024 and 2025 for the Department of Agriculture. As a result of the pandemic and the increasing threat of climate change, it is clear that the agency's work is critical, now more than ever, to creating a resilient food system in the state. We respectfully request that the legislature acknowledge the need to expand funding levels at the agency and ask that you support the following additions to the agency's budget:

- Support funding the CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program with an appropriation of \$1 million annually.
- Support continued Farmland Restoration and Climate Resiliency Grant Program funding at \$5 million annually.

Farm to School Funding

Before joining American Farmland Trust, I served as the Farm and Sea to School Coordinator with the Maine Department of Education and on the Leadership Committee of the Maine Farm to School Network. My work supported both schools and producers and was vital in shaping historical policy, including the bills that provide reliable funding for school meals at no cost (School Meals for All, [LD 1679](#)) and a local foods incentive program (The Local Foods Fund, [LD 636](#)). When Maine's School Meals for All was signed into law in July of 2021, the urgent need for funding was met



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by April 2022. Like the CT Grown for CT Kids bill that passed in 2021, the need for annual funding to make this a viable program is vital. Annual funding in the Connecticut Department of Agriculture budget is essential in strengthening CT Grown for CT Kids and ensuring this program continues to support Connecticut children and producers across the state.

The agricultural industry in Connecticut has a \$4 billion impact on the state's economy, supports 29,163 jobs, and has profound environmental and social benefits¹. School nutrition programs are, to put it one way, "the largest restaurant in town." They are tasked to feed the future of our country, and programs like CT Grown for CT Kids can potentially enrich the lives of Connecticut school children and producers. These grants inject much-needed funding into invaluable Farm to School programs across the state. In 2021, 59 applicants asked for \$962,000 in funding. With the program's initial budget of \$250,000, the CT Department of Agriculture made 13 project awards². The current school year's round of grants saw double the number of grantees awarded compared to 2022, with \$452,268 allotted to 32 school districts, farmers, childcare providers, non-profit organizations, and local businesses all committed to building a robust Farm to School program in Connecticut. While this is a significant increase from the prior years, there were 72 applications totaling \$1,022,285 worth of projects³. There is a clear growing interest in and a need for secure funding from the Connecticut Department of Agriculture.

The CT Grown for CT Kids grant program is a win-win for Connecticut children and producers. When funded, it promotes climate change resiliency, strengthens local food systems, including Connecticut's agricultural sector, and promotes the health of children across the state. The last three years of the COVID-19 pandemic have cast a spotlight on our nation's strengths and weaknesses. Child food insecurity has increased significantly due to increased rates of poverty stemming from job loss. [Feeding America](#) estimated that 92,430 or 12.6% of Connecticut children are food insecure as of October 2020. When school buildings closed and classes became remote, we saw schools' critical role in keeping our children fed. Unpredictable inventories and unprecedented strains on national food supplies were felt by all American consumers, including those tasked with the important responsibility of feeding our youth: school nutrition programs. We have also seen the importance of having resilient and diverse local food systems amidst a global food economy. When commodity foods around the country became hard to source, Connecticut farmers were poised and eager to step in. Producers across the state pivoted to meet the needs of schools and became an increasingly reliable source of healthy, fresh food. And when national food shortages impacted supply chains, schools were not exempt from this challenge. Ever buoyant and motivated, we saw school buyers look to their neighbors and community for solutions. Farm to school relationships grew, local food showed up on more school meal trays, and students' connections to the source of their food was strengthened.

¹ Lopez, Rigoberto A., et al. *Economic impacts of Connecticut's agricultural industry: Update* (2015).

² Mia, Finley. USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Recovery and Resilience. *Local and Regional Food Systems Response to COVID*.

³ Connecticut Department of Agriculture. 2023, January 5. *Connecticut Department of Agriculture Announces CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Recipients* [Press release]. <https://us10.campaign-archive.com/?u=b338f99cc6826335fea2beaa1&id=f2ac7887dc>



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The CT Grown for CT Kids bill supports communities across the state, especially those with high rates of food insecurity, by providing healthy, affordable, and nutritious food from local agricultural producers. This critical investment will also create market expansion

and diversification opportunities for producers looking to keep the food they grow in their community.

Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry

Climate destabilization threatens lives, livelihoods, food security, natural resources, and our economy across the State and Nation. Farmers, especially Beginning Farmers and Black Farmers, Indigenous Farmers, and Farmers of Color or BIPOC producers, have been on the edge of financial viability, and disruptions to the food system due to climate change have hit them hard. The significant and undeniable changes in weather patterns are impacting growing conditions, and the increased threat of natural disasters can destroy a producer's entire operation. At the same time, our farmers and the farmland they manage are a key part of the state's fight against climate change. Farmland soils and plants store carbon, manage stormwater, provide a more stable and just food system, and diversify our economy.

Prior to the additions of climate-smart agriculture and forestry programming in Section 22-6c last legislative session, the Connecticut Department of Agriculture's Farmland Restoration Grant Program was and continues to be a tremendous resource to farmers across the state. The Program was originally started by the Governor Malloy's administration, who allocated a \$5 million bond to increase food and fiber production by restoring lands to active agricultural production. Since its inception, the Program has been an important tool for farmers looking for additional farmland to expand their operations, including beginning farmers who often cannot afford to buy or lease existing farmland. And now, thanks to the hard work of the 2022 Connecticut State Legislature, this highly successful and well-favored Connecticut Department of Agriculture Program explicitly pays for farmers and landowners to implement climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices. In addition, the current statute also allows for agriculture service providers to apply for funding to offer much needed technical assistance. This added capacity to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture helps increase the technical assistance available to producers, ensuring they have the necessary tools and resources to implement these critical practices.

Earlier this year, the Connecticut Department of Agriculture announced the first round of grant funding for the Program, with an initial investment of \$7 million allocated to the agency in the FY 2023 Biennium Budget Adjustments. In the first round of grant funding, the agency received 78 applications for nearly \$55 million in requests. These requests came from farmers, non-profit organizations, and others committed to supporting increased climate-smart agriculture. The many applicants and funding requests show a tremendous need for this grant program.

WLA is confident that funding the new Connecticut Farmland Restoration and Climate Resiliency Grant program at \$5 million annually for the next two years



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will sufficiently meet the needs of producers to implement climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices. In addition, producers will have the opportunity to leverage the additional federal funding that the United States Department of Agriculture

– Natural Resources Conservation Service will receive through the Inflation Reduction Act and the upcoming 2023 Farm Bill.

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, I thank the Committee for allowing us to share our conditional support for H.B. 6659. We appreciate all that you have done, both in helping to ensure Connecticut agriculture remains viable and in protecting Connecticut's valuable farmland. Please know that we are available to act as a resource should you seek additional information regarding Connecticut's agricultural sector.

With sincere regards,
Robin Kerber
American Farmland Trust & Working Lands Alliance